

**IMPORTANT TIPS FOR LAWYERS REPRESENTING CHILDREN**

1. **Call up the chain of command at DCF and document your conversations in email.**
If you do not receive what your client needs in a timely fashion, do not be afraid to file a motion in court.
2. **Children under age 3, particularly infants 6 months and under, are the most vulnerable to child abuse and neglect.**
Treat cases involving non-school aged children with heightened caution and urgency.

Hold DCF to the highest standard of care and timeliness, as developmental windows are critical and a child’s sense of time may be very different from your own.

Make sure each child under 3 is screened for developmental delays at least twice per year and receives early intervention and education services (even if the child is developmentally on target) such as Early Head Start.

Make sure each young child you represent in a high-risk family is receiving the full array of services offered to meet his/her safety, emotional, and developmental needs.
3. **Do everything possible to persuade your clients not to “sign out” of DCF at age 18**.
DCF can offer excellent educational and other benefits to older youth. Don’t let DCF persuade your client to go it alone at 18. Re-entry is hard.
4. **Seek opportunities for your client to speak for him/herself and participate in decision-making about his/her future.**
Children have a right to participate in court, in case plan meetings, and in important decisions. Insist that meetings be scheduled outside of school hours, and insist that DCF transport your client in person to all meetings in which they wish to participate.
5. **Ensure that your clients – from preschoolers to college aged students – have the best educational opportunity possible**.
Make sure each three or four year old is enrolled in and attending a high-quality preschool unless there are compelling and documented reasons why preschool is not in the child’s best interest. Ask for an educational surrogate for each committed child with special education needs (or *potential* unidentified special education needs).

Make sure you and DCF have and use *all* relevant educational information (including attendance, discipline history, special education documents, testing information, special education status, and grade level performance).

Work with DCF or parents to enroll students in relevant magnet school lotteries.

Establish open lines of communication with educators at your clients’ schools.

Do not assume everything is ok because your client is “promoted” to the next grade level or is passing his classes; hold your client and his school to a high standard.

Remember that committed children have the right to remain in their home schools if it is in their best interest even when their placement changes.

1. **Permanency is key.**
All youth need a stable adult in their lives as a permanent resource. Ask DCF for permanency meetings and team conferencing for any youth who does not have a permanency resource and is not a reunification candidate.
2. **Remember the Specific Steps.**
They are the blueprint for reunification and can be used to hold DCF accountable.
3. **Independent Living Plan.**Remember that all older youths’ permanency plans must include an individualized plan for how their need for education, vocational training, benefits, housing, medical care and emotional supports will be met.
4. **Visitation is essential and required, including visitation with siblings.**
Think of creative ways to maximize visitation opportunities; if you do not get the visitation schedule your client needs, file a motion in court.
5. **Seek the expertise of ARGs in DCF offices.**
Seek independent evaluations where necessary to increase or modify services or visitation or even permanency recommendations.
6. **File motions to support services and reunification.**
The clock is ticking from the day of removal.
7. **Pick up the phone; call a team meeting.**
Often different entities involved in a child’s life – their school, parents, pediatrician, service providers, group home leaders, therapists, mentors, DCF – do not “talk” with one another. As a lawyer, you can perform a tremendous service simply by getting all of the relevant parties to sit down together to talk through best strategies and share information. If an in-person meeting is too difficult, set up a conference call. Using a team approach can seem time-consuming at first, but can save time down the road and yield far better results for your client.
8. **Ask for anything your client needs.**
Your client will receive zero percent of the services you don’t ask for.
9. **Seek technical assistance or support from peers and from the Center for Children’s Advocacy.**